

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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Services We Offer

Individual Therapy
Marital / Couple's
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Relationship Counseling
Personal Life Coaching
Medication Management
Speaking
Evaluations/Assessments

How To Have That Difficult Conversation

You think that your aging father is depressed and he needs to get professional help, but you dread addressing this with him. Your co-worker has come to work three days this week with alcohol on her breath. You need to talk to your son about an inappropriate sexualized post on social media, and he does not know that you have seen it.

These are all examples of difficult *conversations*. Difficult conversations surface all the time and we can tend to want to hide from them. When we procrastinate, unaddressed problems tend to get worse and become even more entrenched and problematic. Worse still, they also become even more challenging to talk about, the longer we delay. Let's look together at how you can break through these obstacles so that you can address tough issues in your life and relationships.

When You Start, Start From Where You Are

PREPARE emotionally and intellectually. In preparing for a difficult conversation, first start with personal self-examination. A common error that is made in addressing tough topics is that the initiator has not properly prepared emotionally and intellectually for the conversation. As a result, an initiator may come across as overly aggressive, too reactive, or even unclear. Personal self-examination creates an intentional and much needed pause to address the thinking, emotions, and motives that can greatly influence the quality of the conversation and the related outcome.

KNOW why. Identify and acknowledge, "Why do I need to have this conversation?" That is, what compels the need for this conversation? What are the consequences if I continue to avoid? What are my real motives for this?

KNOW your fears. Ask yourself, "What are my fears or reservations about addressing this?" This step helps you to identify perceived risks of the conversation and rationally address them. When a person does not first evaluate fears and reservations reflectively ahead of time, these anxieties are typically brought unconsciously into the conversation by the initiator.

Unfortunately, this can result in an accelerated implosion of the conversation, as the unaddressed anxieties surface as emotional reactivity by the initiator and then are received negatively by the responder. Much like a self-fulfilled prophecy, the anxieties become reality and the conversation takes a turn for the worse.

KNOW your desired outcome. Ask yourself, "What outcome am I hoping for?" You will want to identify ahead of time what you desire to achieve by having the conversation. Since the person and relationship are important to you, consider how you can honor the person while also keeping in line with your desired goal.

EXAMINE your expectations. A question to ask yourself is, "Are my expectations reasonable for the person and situation?" What changes are you hoping that the person will make and/or what changes are you wanting in the relationship? Carefully consider what role, if any, you have taken in contributing to the problem; take ownership if you have been a part of the problem. In considering expectations, you may want to consult a trusted and wise friend, counselor, or expert to help you look at this more objectively. For people of faith, prayer can be very helpful in this stage of reflection and preparation.

When You Invite Them to Talk

AVOID ambushing. Once you have prepared for your conversation and you are ready to approach the person about having a conversation, be mindful to avoid ambushing. Ambushing happens when you do not give a person any warning ahead of time about an important conversation that you want to have with them. Rather than surprising them by broaching the topic without any advanced notice, demonstrate respect by approaching them earlier and requesting that you all have some time to talk and name the subject. For example, if you need to revisit an awkward situation with your friend, you could say, "I have been thinking about the incident at the volunteer meeting last Monday night. I am concerned about how this affected our relationship. Your friendship really matters to me. Can we find a time this week to have a coffee together and talk about it?"

MAKE the invitation privately, not in front of other people. Call on the phone or talk in person to make the invitation, but avoid texting or emails. Important conversations with important people in our lives deserve personal communication. Many people use texting or emails as a kind of shield or buffer when they are uncomfortable confronting an issue. This is a poor approach to important pieces of communication where more sensitive feelings are involved. Be courageous and choose more direct forms of communication.

Treatment for

Depression
Anxiety / Panic Attacks
Eating Disorders
Bi-polar Disorder
Obsessive –
Compulsive
Disorder
Compulsive Behaviors
such as sexual
addiction
Post-traumatic Stress
Disorder from past
abuse
Ryotional issues
Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
Adolescent
Children ages 10 & up



SET time parameters for the conversation. Setting an expectation of how long you will meet together will bring structure to the conversation and avoid the pitfall of belaboring points or over-connecting to the point where you feel emotionally and mentally exhausted. You can always schedule another meeting if more follow-up to the original conversation is needed.

When You Meet, Meet Them Where They Are

FOSTER a climate of emotional safety. Emotional safety is expressed and fostered by intentionality and holding a clear attitude of respect for both parties. Hopefully, emotional safety has been part of your relationship prior to this conversation. When a person already feels trusted and secure in the relationship, difficult conversations tend to have an easier on-ramp. However, many times a lack of emotional safety is part of the problem that you need to address.

CHOOSE to lower or soften your tone of voice. When needing to confront, the message itself tends to carry enough weight and a harsh tone will predictably trigger resistance and reactivity in the listener. *Many times, the listener is not arguing with you about WHAT you said, but rather he or she is responding to the WAY you said it!* In other words, the content of your message is not always what a listener is reacting to, but rather the delivery style that comes across as harsh or emotionally threatening.

BEGIN by sharing your story authentically. Beginning with your own thoughts and feelings helps set a tone of authenticity. This is needed for honest, heart-connecting conversations. If you have in any way contributed to the problem, acknowledge this and apologize. This intentional vulnerability on your part demonstrates your good faith toward the relationship. Further, share with them your concerns and how this fits with your care and concern for them.

INVITE them to share their story. Next, invite them to share their thoughts and feelings in response. Approach them with curiosity. “What are your thoughts about this? Is this true also for you? Have you noticed this also about yourself, our relationship, etc.? How do you feel about what I shared?”

CHOOSE to reflect, not deflect. When you inquire of someone’s perspective, choose to reflect what they are saying. This demonstrates clearly that you are listening attentively, are willing to consider their perspective, and that you are desiring to connect. Choosing to reflect and validate creates a pathway for dialogue where the exchange of ideas and perspectives is welcomed. A key question to ask during this stage of dialogue is, “Is there more about that?”

VALIDATE feelings. Whenever possible, validate the sense the person is making from their perspective. Validating does not mean that you agree with the person, but rather that you can understand why they might feel or think a certain way. One of the most common mistakes that people make in working through conflict is refusing to validate another’s perspective out of pride or fear. A key phrase during this stage of dialogue is, “That makes sense to me. I can see how you [can feel or think that way].”

CLARIFY requests and expectations. Once you have exchanged thoughts and feelings on the matter, move to exploring how to resolve the matter and talk about your expectations for change. *Name exactly what you think positive change would look like.* Share how you can personally invest in this change as well.

ASK for feedback and reflect understanding. Ask how the person feels about these expectations for change. In this portion of the dialogue, you are acknowledging boundaries and that you are asking something of them personally. Be sure to reflect and validate how they feel about your requests.

AGREE on next steps. Collaborate together on some specific next steps toward change. Identify and verbalize agreed upon expectations and commitments. Describe exactly what this would look like so that you are both clear on the changes. Agree to have a follow-up conversation in the next week or two.

Follow Through

STAY connected by making contact. Follow-up with the person in a timely manner. Check in with each other on how the agreed changes are going. This step helps bring further security to the relationship and demonstrate your personal investment and care. Be sure to allow for re-evaluation, to make adjustments and keep communication flowing.

ACCEPT risk. Remember that even the most caring and skilled communicators do not always achieve their desired goals. You cannot change anyone, you can only invite change. The risk involved is that people, despite our care and efforts, may reject or resist change. This can often feel very personal to the one reaching out. There are no guarantees that a person will respond positively to your efforts. Nevertheless, when you genuinely care about a person, the risk is worth it. Ultimately, each person is responsible to grow and change.



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